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Volunteers in the Courts News Spring 2003

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Langlade County programs assist the elderly

Two programs are helping to safeguard the well-being of some of the most vulnerable citizens in northeast Wisconsin's Langlade County, population 20,000. The first program recruits volunteer guardians to monitor the safety and security of elderly wards; the second focuses on keeping at-risk adults safe from harm.

Guardianship program helps elderly in need

Arlene Bonacci has been designated as guardian for nine elderly adults in the last seven years. She helps these individuals with life's daily challenges, and sometimes, when the time comes, assists with their funeral arrangements. Langlade County recently recognized Bonacci's service to the elderly through the county's guardianship program by honoring her with a plaque.



Arlene Bonacci accepts an award for her work as a guardian from Judge James P. Jansen, Langlade County Circuit Court.

"It's hard to find guardians that are willing to invest the time needed," said Donna Retzak of the county's social services agency. Bonacci's experience with her most recent ward, an 88-year-old woman, highlights the commitment required of volunteer guardians. The woman lives alone in an apartment and is supposed to receive home care visits three times a day. There are days, however, when that does not happen and Bonacci must step in to make sure the woman is fed and take care of any other needs she might have. When the woman refused to go to the doctor, Bonacci took time with her, earning her trust until the woman agreed to receive medical care.

The court appoints volunteer guardians when the need arises. They are paid a stipend and receive reimbursement for mileage and some expenses. In exchange, they must make difficult decisions about the ward's finances and medical care, sometimes even conveying whether the person wishes to be placed on a respirator or life support. "I never leave town without staff and people knowing where I can be reached," Bonacci said.

In spite of the challenges, Bonacci finds the work very rewarding. "I know I am helping people and being of service to them," she said. "Sometimes you get a big thank you from them and sometimes you don't get anything because they can't talk to you."

While Langlade County does not yet have a formal program for volunteer guardians, it is moving in that direction with Register in Probate Joy Pecha taking the lead. She is currently seeking people interested in becoming guardians. For information, call Pecha at (715) 627-6213 or e-mail

joy.pecha@wicourts.gov.

At-risk team

When an elderly woman withdrew \$10,000 from her account, her bank took notice of the unusually large withdrawal and called law enforcement to look into it. After officers talked with the woman, they discovered that multiple organizations had been hassling her for money. The police went to Judge James P. Jansen, Langlade County Circuit Court, to explore possible ways to protect vulnerable seniors, and, in 1998, the At-Risk Team was formed.

The county's social services department led the effort to build the team and provide training for the judge, law enforcement, the fire department, health care workers, and others to help them identify all types of abuse and protect the elderly. They are, in many cases, serving as the eyes and ears of the family. "We see family members getting less involved as family sizes are getting smaller," Jansen said.

The 28-member team meets bi-monthly to discuss how to improve services to elder abuse victims and their families. They also debrief cases to learn from one another. The team recently expanded to serving the mentally ill and developmentally disabled.

The team has seen cases of physical, sexual, psychological, material, and financial abuse and neglect, as well as self-neglect. "Elderly and vulnerable adults often don't report because they grew up in times when you don't talk about things like abuse, or because they are emotionally or financially dependent upon the abuser," Retzak said. "Elder abuse is on the rise across the nation and in Langlade County."

For more information on the At-Risk Team call Retzak at (715) 627-6500.

Brown County Mediation Center expands services to families, neighborhoods

At the courthouse in Green Bay, Wednesday afternoons bring frustrated landlords face-to-face with their dissatisfied tenants. This is the return day for contested evictions, and tempers flare almost as fast as accusations fly. Working to bring things down a notch are two or three trained volunteers from the Brown County Mediation Center who stand ready to assist disputants willing to look for common ground. In many cases, and in the most unexpected places, they find it.

Recently, a family of three was facing eviction. The landlord had tried for months to communicate with the couple to no avail, and it came out during mediation that both parents were mentally ill; their daughter – at age 14 – was doing her best to run the household. The couple had not moved because they were overwhelmed by the notion of sorting through their many possessions and packing. With the mediator's help, the landlord worked with the tenants to develop a room-by-room schedule for vacating and even brought in maintenance men to help. "It was very touching," said Diane Legomsky, who mediated the dispute and serves as director of the Mediation Center. Had the judge simply evicted, Legomsky pointed out, the family would have lost its housing assistance for two years – and the landlord might still be awaiting their departure.

When landlord and tenant reach an agreement, the mediator puts it in writing and, if the tenant vacates by the agreed upon date, there is no eviction; if not, the landlord is entitled to an automatic writ. Legomsky said landlords often are willing to forgive that month's rent and to give back security deposits to dispatch the tenants. The money makes moving a much more realistic option for most tenants.

Landlord-tenant disputes are just one focus for the Brown County Mediation Center. They handle other small claims actions on Thursday evenings and Friday mornings, and work with families, organizations (especially non-profits), and neighborhoods to resolve myriad disputes before they

find their way into court. The Center has 50 regular mediators; half work in court and half focus on non-court disputes.

Increasingly, Legomsky said, the family disputes involve aging parents. One recent case involved an elderly woman who left her farm for the suburbs to live closer to her adult children. The six children were unable to agree about what to do with the family farm and how to take care of Mom and, before long, the sibling with the power of attorney for financial matters was not speaking to the sibling with the power of attorney for medical matters. Then the siblings' spouses jumped into the fight and restraining orders were issued.

A social worker asked the family to try addressing its problems through mediation. The mediator brought in all the adult children and they had a discussion about the old rivalries that had resurfaced at this stressful juncture in their lives. After 10 such meetings, they discovered that they all agreed upon one important thing: that they loved their mother and wanted the best for her. The mediator then convinced Mom – who was trying to stay out of the mess for fear of making it worse – to state her preferences for her medical care and for the family farm. Once the siblings had refocused on what was best for Mom, they were able to stop fighting about what was best for each of them. The family is now holding its own, although two of the siblings still are not speaking. They all meet monthly with the mediator.

In 2003, Legomsky said the Center would focus on resolving neighborhood disputes and racial/ethnic conflicts. The Green Bay Police Department helped the Center to secure a \$10,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to conduct neighborhood mediations, and the Center secured a smaller grant from a local foundation to support the racial/ethnic work.

For more information on the Brown County Mediation Center, contact Legomsky at (920) 438-7067 or e-mail Legomskd@uwgb.edu.